

This section summarizes the purpose of the Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the West Area Neighborhoods Specific Plan “project” or “proposed project.” The following discussion addresses the environmental procedures that are to be followed according to State law, the intended uses of the EIR, the project’s relationship to the City’s General Plan, the EIR scope and organization, and a summary of the agency and public comments received during the public review period for the Notice of Preparation (NOP).

1.1 PURPOSE AND INTENDED USES OF THE EIR

The City of Fresno, as lead agency, determined that the proposed Specific Plan is a "project" within the definition of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). CEQA requires the preparation of an environmental impact report prior to approving any project, which may have a significant impact on the environment. For the purposes of CEQA, the term "project" refers to the whole of an action, which has the potential for resulting in a direct physical change or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment (CEQA Guidelines Section 15378[a]).

An EIR must disclose the expected environmental impacts, including impacts that cannot be avoided, growth-inducing effects, impacts found not to be significant, and significant cumulative impacts, as well as identify mitigation measures and alternatives to the proposed project that could reduce or avoid its adverse environmental impacts. CEQA requires government agencies to consider and, where feasible, minimize environmental impacts of proposed development. CEQA further requires public agencies to balance a variety of public objectives, including economic, environmental, and social factors in making a decision to approve a development project with significant and unavoidable environmental impacts.

The City of Fresno, as the Lead Agency, has prepared this Draft EIR to provide the public and responsible and trustee agencies with an objective analysis of the potential environmental impacts resulting from construction and operation of the Specific Plan Project. The environmental review process enables interested parties to evaluate the proposed project in terms of its environmental consequences, to examine and recommend methods to eliminate or reduce potential adverse impacts, and to consider a reasonable range of alternatives to the project. While CEQA requires that consideration be given to avoiding adverse environmental effects, the lead agency must balance adverse environmental effects against other public objectives, including the economic and social benefits of a project, in determining whether a project should be approved.

This EIR will be used by the City to determine whether to approve, modify, or deny the proposed project and associated approvals in light of the project’s environmental effects. The EIR will be used as the primary environmental document to evaluate full project development, along with all associated infrastructure improvements, and permitting actions associated with the Project. All of the actions and components of the proposed project are described in detail in Chapter 2.0 of this Draft EIR.

1.2 TYPE OF EIR

The CEQA Guidelines identify several types of EIRs, each applicable to different project circumstances. This EIR has been prepared as a Program EIR pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15168. The program-level analysis considers the broad environmental effects of the proposed project as a whole.

It is noted that the Specific Plan provides a very high level of design detail for certain components of the project. To the extent that sufficient detail is available in the Specific Plan, a full project-level analysis is provided in this EIR. Examples of a full project level analysis would include topics that are related to the physical acreage affected (i.e. the project footprint), as opposed to the number of units, land uses/zoning, or other design parameters. Topics such as Biological Resources, Cultural Resources, and Hydrology/Water Quality are analyzed at a project-level analysis in this EIR given that these are physical environmental resources, and the area of impact is fully defined. Additionally, the Specific Plan includes a substantial level of detailed information that allows for a project-level analysis of topics such as Air Quality, Greenhouse Gases and Climate Change, Noise, Population and Housing, Transportation and Circulation, and Utilities. The analysis for these topics is driven by the number of units and square footage of development, which is detailed in the land use design and development projections. In some cases, there may be specific commercial uses that have design details developed at a later date that cannot reasonably be analyzed at a project-level at this time. Additionally, the design of the school facilities and other public facilities are not known at this time, so they are not able to be analyzed at a project-level.

This EIR examines the planning, construction and operation of the project. The program-level approach, with some project-level analysis, is appropriate for the proposed project because it allows comprehensive consideration of the reasonably anticipated scope of the development plan; however, as discussed above, not all design aspects of the future development phases are known at this stage in the planning process. Subsequent individual development that requires further discretionary approvals will be examined in light of this EIR to determine whether additional environmental documentation must be prepared.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15168 states that a program EIR is an EIR which may be prepared on a series of actions that can be characterized as one large project and are related either:

- 1) Geographically,
- 2) As logical parts in the chain of contemplated actions,
- 3) In connection with issuance of rules, regulations, plans or other general criteria to govern the conduct of a continuing program, or
- 4) As individual activities carried out under the same authorizing statutory or regulatory authority and having generally similar environmental effects which can be mitigated in similar ways.

According to CEQA Guidelines Section 15168, subdivision (c)(5), “[a] program EIR will be most helpful in dealing with subsequent activities if it deals with the effects of the program as specifically and comprehensively as possible.” Later environmental documents (EIRs, mitigated negative

declarations, or negative declarations) can incorporate by reference materials from the program EIR regarding regional influences, secondary impacts, cumulative impacts, broad alternatives, and other factors (CEQA Guidelines Section 15168[d][2]). These later documents need only focus on new impacts that have not been considered before (CEQA Guidelines Section 15168[d][3]).

Section 15168(c), entitled “Use with Later Activities,” provides, in pertinent part, as follows:

Subsequent activities in the program must be examined in the light of the program EIR to determine whether an additional environmental document must be prepared:

- (1) If a later activity would have effects that were not examined in the program EIR, a new Initial Study would need to be prepared leading to either an EIR or a Negative Declaration.
- (2) If the agency finds that pursuant to Section 15162, no new effects could occur or no new mitigation measures would be required, the agency can approve the activities as being within the scope of the project covered by the program EIR, and no new environmental document would be required.
- (3) An agency shall incorporate feasible mitigation measures and alternatives developed in the program EIR into subsequent actions in the program.
- (4) Where the subsequent activities involve site specific operations, the agency should use a written checklist or similar device to document the evaluation of the site and the activity to determine whether the environmental effects of the operation were covered in the program EIR.

Here, the City anticipates preparing a written checklist or similar device whenever landowners within the Specific Plan area submit applications for site-specific approvals (i.e. tentative maps, conditional use permits, or other discretionary entitlements). The checklist would serve in part as a consistency checklist to determine if the application for site specific approval is consistent with the General Plan, Specific Plan, Conditions of Approval, and Mitigation Measures, and it would also include a review of the project details relative to what was anticipated and analyzed in the program EIR (i.e. are there new environmental effects that were not covered by the program EIR). The City’s expectation, at least at present, is that the checklist will conclude that most, or all, components of the Specific Plan can be developed with no new analysis of environmental effects given that there is a high level of resolution with regard to the project details that have been analyzed in this program EIR. In some cases, however, a site-specific application (i.e. commercial use) may have specific issues associated with the project, or business, that this program EIR could not anticipate given the information that was available at this time. In those situations, the detailed site-specific information from that application could have site-specific effects not wholly anticipated in this EIR and would require some additional environmental review. (See also CEQA Guidelines section 15063, subd. (b)(1)(C).)

Future site-specific approvals may also be narrowed pursuant to the rules for tiering set forth in CEQA Guidelines Section 15152. “[T]iering is a process by which agencies can adopt programs, plans, policies, or ordinances with EIRs focusing on ‘the big picture,’ and can then use streamlined CEQA review for individual projects that are consistent with such...[first tier decisions] and are...consistent

with local agencies' governing general plans and zoning.'" (*Koster v. County of San Joaquin* (1996) 47 Cal.App.4th 29, 36.) Section 15152 provides that, where a first-tier EIR has "adequately addressed" the subject of cumulative impacts, such impacts need not be revisited in second- and third-tier documents. Furthermore, second- and third-tier documents may limit the examination of impacts to those that "were not examined as significant effects" in the prior EIR or "[a]re susceptible to substantial reduction or avoidance by the choice of specific revisions in the project, by the imposition of conditions, or other means." In general, significant environmental effects have been "adequately addressed" if the lead agency determines that:

- a) they have been mitigated or avoided as a result of the prior environmental impact report and findings adopted in connection with that prior environmental impact report; or
- b) they have been examined at a sufficient level of detail in the prior environmental impact report to enable those effects to be mitigated or avoided by site specific revisions, the imposition of conditions, or by other means in connection with the approval of the later project.

Here, as noted above, the City anticipates preparing a written checklist or similar device whenever landowners within the Specific Plan area submit applications for site-specific approvals (i.e. tentative maps, conditional use permits, or other discretionary entitlements). The checklist would serve in part as a consistency checklist to determine if the application for site specific approval is consistent with the General Plan, Specific Plan, Conditions of Approval, and Mitigation Measures, and it would also include a review of the project details relative to what was anticipated and analyzed in the program EIR (i.e. have all significant environmental impacts identified been "adequately addressed" in the program EIR). Thus, if a new analysis is required for these site-specific actions, it would focus on impacts that cannot be "avoided or mitigated" by mitigation measures that either (i) were adopted in connection with the Specific Plan or (ii) were formulated based on information in this EIR.

In addition, for purely residential projects consistent with the Specific Plan, the City intends to preserve its ability to treat such projects as exempt from CEQA pursuant to Government Code section 65457. Subdivision (a) of that statute provides that "[a]ny residential development project, including any subdivision, or any zoning change that is undertaken to implement and is consistent with a specific plan for which an [EIR] has been certified after January 1, 1980, is exempt from the requirements of [CEQA]." The statutes go on to say, moreover, that "if after adoption of the specific plan, an event as specified in Section 21166 of the Public Resources Code occurs, the exemption provided by this subdivision does not apply unless and until a supplemental [EIR] for the specific plan is prepared and certified in accordance with the provisions of [CEQA]. After a supplemental [EIR] is certified, the exemption ... applies to projects undertaken pursuant to the specific plan." (See also CEQA Guidelines section 15182.)

When purely residential projects are proposed, the City will consider whether they qualify for this exemption or whether the West Area Neighborhoods Specific Plan EIR must be updated through a supplement to this EIR or a subsequent EIR as required by Public Resources Code section 21166 and CEQA Guidelines sections 15162 and 15163.

1.3 RESPONSIBLE AND TRUSTEE AGENCIES

As required by CEQA, this EIR defines lead, responsible, and trustee agencies. The City of Fresno is the “Lead Agency” for the project because it holds principal responsibility for approving the project. The term “Responsible Agency” includes all public agencies other than the Lead Agency that have discretionary approval power over the project or an aspect of the project (CEQA Guidelines Section 15381). For the purpose of CEQA, a “Trustee” agency has jurisdiction by law over natural resources that are held in trust for the people of the State of California. CEQA Guidelines Section 15386 recognizes four particular trustee agencies: (a) the California Department of Fish and Wildlife with regard to the fish and wildlife of the State, to designated rare or endangered native plants, and to game refuges, ecological reserves, and other areas administered by the department; (b) the State Lands Commission with regard to State owned “sovereign” lands such as the beds of navigable waters and State school lands; (c) the State Department of Parks and Recreation with regard to units of the State Park System; and (d) The University of California with regard to sites within the Natural Land and Water Reserves System.

The following agencies are considered Responsible Agencies for this project, and may be required to issue permits or approve certain aspects of the proposed project:

- California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW);
- California Department of Transportation (Caltrans);
- Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board – Clean Water Act Section 401 Water Quality Certification, National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) general construction permit;
- San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District – Approval of construction-related air quality permits, authority to Construct, Permit to Operate for stationary sources of air pollution;
- Central Unified School District – Approval of school sites.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife will also function as a trustee agency with respect to the proposed project. The City is unaware of any other trustee agency, as the proposed project would not affect any state owned “sovereign” lands, any units of the State Park System, or any sites within the University of California’s Natural Land and Water Reserves System.

1.4 ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW PROCESS

The review and certification process for the EIR has involved, or will involve, the following general procedural steps:

NOTICE OF PREPARATION

The City circulated a Notice of Preparation (NOP) of an EIR for the proposed project on June 28, 2019 to responsible and trustee agencies, the State Clearinghouse, and the public. A public scoping meeting was held on July 24, 2019 at 6:00 p.m., at the Glacier Point Middle School Cafeteria in Fresno to present the project description to the public and interested agencies, and to receive comments

from the public and interested agencies regarding the scope of the environmental analysis to be included in the Draft EIR. Concerns raised in response to the NOP were considered during preparation of the Draft EIR. The NOP and responses to the NOP by interested parties are presented in **Appendix A** of this EIR.

DRAFT EIR

This document constitutes the Draft EIR. The Draft EIR contains a description of the project, description of the environmental setting, identification of project impacts, and mitigation measures for impacts found to be significant, as well as an analysis of project alternatives, identification of significant irreversible environmental changes, growth-inducing impacts, and cumulative impacts. This Draft EIR identifies issues determined to have no impact or a less than significant impact, and provides detailed analysis of potentially significant and significant impacts. Comments received in response to the NOP were considered in preparing the analysis in this EIR. Upon completion of the Draft EIR, the City has filed the Notice of Completion (NOC) with the State Clearinghouse of the Governor's Office of Planning and Research to begin the public review period.

PUBLIC NOTICE/PUBLIC REVIEW

The City has provided a public notice of availability for the Draft EIR, and invites comment from the general public, agencies, organizations, and other interested parties. Consistent with CEQA, the review period for this Draft EIR is forty-five (45) days. Public comment on the Draft EIR or questions regarding the Draft EIR should be addressed to:

Casey Lauderdale
City of Fresno
Planning and Development Department
2600 Fresno Street, Room 3065, Fresno, CA 93721
Casey.Lauderdale@Fresno.gov

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS/FINAL EIR

Following the public review period, a Final EIR will be prepared. The Final EIR will respond to significant environmental issues raised either in written comments received during the public review period or in oral comments received at a public hearing during such review period.

CERTIFICATION OF THE EIR/PROJECT CONSIDERATION

CEQA Guidelines Section 15090 requires lead agencies to certify the final EIR prior to approving a project. The lead agency decision-making body shall certify that (i) the final EIR has been completed in compliance with CEQA; (ii) that the final EIR was presented to the decision-making body, which reviewed and considered the information contained in the final EIR prior to approving the project; and (iii) that the final EIR reflects the lead agency's independent judgment and analysis.

For the proposed project, the City Council shall be the City's ultimate decision-making body. The Council will therefore review and consider the Final EIR and make a determination regarding whether the document is "adequate and complete." In general, a Final EIR meets this standard if:

- 1) The EIR shows a good faith effort at full disclosure of environmental information; and
- 2) The EIR provides sufficient analysis to allow decisions to be made regarding the proposed project in contemplation of environmental considerations.

The level of detail contained throughout this EIR is consistent with Section 15151 of the CEQA Guidelines and recent court decisions, which provide the standard of adequacy on which this document is based. The Guidelines state as follows:

"An EIR should be prepared with a sufficient degree of analysis to provide decision makers with information which enables them to make a decision which intelligently takes account of the environmental consequences. An evaluation of the environmental effects of a proposed project need not be exhaustive, but the sufficiency of an EIR is to be reviewed in the light of what is reasonably feasible. Disagreement among experts does not make an EIR inadequate, but the EIR should summarize the main points of disagreement among the experts. The courts have looked not for perfection but for adequacy, completeness, and a good faith effort at full disclosure."

Following review and consideration of the Final EIR, the City may take action to approve, modify, or reject the project. As part of project approval, the City also is also required to adopt a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, as described below, prepared in accordance with Public Resources Code Section 21081.6(a) and CEQA Guidelines Section 15097. This Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program must include all of the mitigation measures that have been incorporated into or imposed upon the project to reduce or avoid significant effects on the environment, and would be designed to ensure that these measures are actually carried out during project implementation.

1.5 ORGANIZATION AND SCOPE

Sections 15122 through 15132 of the State CEQA Guidelines identify the content requirements for Draft and Final EIRs. An EIR must include or address a description of the environmental setting, an environmental impact analysis, mitigation measures, alternatives, significant irreversible environmental changes, growth-inducing impacts, and cumulative impacts. Discussion of the environmental issues addressed in the Draft EIR was established through review of environmental and planning documentation developed for the project, environmental and planning documentation prepared for recent projects located within the City of Fresno, applicable local and regional planning documents, and responses to the NOP.

This Draft EIR is organized in the following manner:

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Executive Summary summarizes the characteristics of the proposed project, known areas of controversy and issues to be resolved, and provides a concise summary matrix of the project's environmental impacts and possible mitigation measures. This chapter identifies alternatives that reduce or avoid at least one significant environmental effect of the proposed project.

CHAPTER 1.0 – INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1.0 briefly describes the purpose of the environmental evaluation, identifies the lead, trustee, and responsible agencies, summarizes the process associated with preparation and certification of an EIR, and identifies the scope and organization of the Draft EIR.

CHAPTER 2.0 – PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Chapter 2.0 provides a detailed description of the proposed project, including the location, intended objectives, background information, the physical and technical characteristics, including the decisions subject to CEQA, related infrastructure improvements, and a list of related agency action requirements.

CHAPTER 3.0 – ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING, IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Chapter 3.0 contains an analysis of each environmental topic area as identified below. Each subchapter addressing a topical area is organized as follows:

Environmental Setting. A description of the existing environment as it pertains to the topical area.

Regulatory Setting. A description of the regulatory environment that may be applicable to the project.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures. Identification of the significance criteria (also referred to as “thresholds of significance” throughout this EIR) by which the significance of impacts are determined, a description of project-related impacts associated with the environmental topic, identification of appropriate mitigation measures, and a conclusion as to the significance of each impact after the incorporation of proposed mitigation measures.

The following environmental topics are addressed in this chapter:

- Aesthetics
- Agricultural Resources
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural and Tribal Resources
- Geology, Soils, and Seismicity
- Greenhouse Gases, Climate Change, and Energy
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials

- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Land Use and Planning
- Noise
- Population and Housing
- Public Services and Recreation
- Transportation and Circulation
- Utilities

CHAPTER 4.0 – OTHER CEQA-REQUIRED TOPICS

Chapter 4.0 evaluates and describes the CEQA required topics as follows: cumulative and significant and unavoidable environmental effects under cumulative conditions. Chapter 4.0 also evaluates and describes the CEQA required topics as follows: impacts considered less-than-significant, significant and irreversible impacts, growth-inducing effects, and significant and unavoidable environmental effects.

CHAPTER 5.0 – ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROJECT

State CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.6 requires that an EIR describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, which could feasibly attain the basic objectives of the project and avoid and/or lessen any significant environmental effects of the project. Chapter 5.0 provides a comparative analysis between the environmental impacts of the project and the selected alternatives.

CHAPTER 6.0 – REPORT PREPARERS

This chapter lists all authors and agencies that assisted in the preparation of the EIR, by name, title, and company or agency affiliation.

CHAPTER 7.0 – REFERENCES

This chapter lists all references used in the preparation of the EIR.

APPENDICES

This section includes all notices and other procedural documents pertinent to the EIR, as well as technical material prepared to support the analysis. The EIR appendices are available in electronic format. The appendices can be viewed online at: <https://www.fresno.gov/westareaplan>.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA (“THRESHOLDS”)

In general, CEQA Guidelines define a significant effect on the environment as “a substantial, or potentially substantial” adverse change in the physical environment. A potential impact is considered significant if a project would substantially degrade the environmental quality of land, air, water, minerals, flora, fauna, ambient noise, and objects of historic and aesthetic significance (CEQA Guidelines §§15360, 15382).

Definitions of significance vary with the physical condition affected and the setting in which the change occurs. The CEQA Guidelines set forth physical impacts that trigger the requirement to make “mandatory findings of significance” (CEQA Guidelines §15065).

This CEQA document relies on three levels of impact significance:

1. Less-than-significant impact, for which no mitigation measures are warranted;
2. Significant impact that can be mitigated to a level that is less than significant; and,
3. Significant impact that cannot be mitigated to a level that is less than significant. Such impacts are referred to as significant and unavoidable.

Each resource area uses a distinct set of significance criteria (also referred to as “thresholds of significance” throughout the EIR). The significance criteria are identified at the beginning of the impact discussion for each resource area. These significance criteria promote consistent evaluation of impacts for all alternatives considered, even though significance criteria are necessarily different for each resource considered. When criteria for significance determinations relative to a specific environmental resource are not identified in the CEQA Guidelines, specific criteria have been developed for this Draft EIR consistent with the past pattern and practice of the City of Fresno.

1.7 COMMENTS RECEIVED ON THE NOTICE OF PREPARATION

The City received thirteen written comment letters on the NOP for the proposed project Draft EIR. A copy of each letter is provided in **Appendix A** of this Draft EIR. A public scoping meeting was held on July 24, 2019 to present the project description to the public and interested agencies, and to receive comments from the public and interested agencies regarding the scope of the environmental analysis to be included in the Draft EIR.

1. April Henry (August 1, 2019)
2. California Department of Water Resources, Division of Safety of Dams (July 19, 2019)
3. California Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, State Clearinghouse and Planning Unit (June 28, 2019)
4. Carl & Lydia Franklin (August 2, 2019)
5. Cathy Caples (August 1, 2019)
6. Central Grizzlies Youth Football & Cheer (August 2, 2019)
7. City of Fresno Transportation Department, Fresno Area Express (July 29, 2019)
8. Forgotten Fresno (July 17, 2019)
9. Fresno Metropolitan Floor Control District (August 1, 2019)
10. Fresno County Public Library (July 8, 2019)
11. Jeff Roberts (July 24, 2019)
12. Patricia and Clifford Upton (July 24, 2019)
13. San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District (July 15, 2019)

1.8 AREAS OF CONTROVERSY

The following are topics of public concern or potential controversy that have become known to the City staff based on public input, known regional issues, and staff observations:

- Conversion of undeveloped land to urban use
- Light, glare, and skyglow
- Traffic congestion from automobiles and large trucks, ensuring safe routes to schools, and provision of alternative transportation infrastructure
- Annexation of county properties into the city
- Parkland, trail, and ball field impacts
- Need for aesthetics improvements, including tree planting
- Air quality and pollution concerns, including dust from construction and agricultural uses, and air pollution along Highway 99
- Project impact on regional stormwater, drainage, and flood control

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